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NEURASTHENIA AMONG GARMENT WORKERS

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In attempting to present a medical problem to an audience presumably uninformed concerning the technical aspects of disease, the physician is confronted with at least two important difficulties. One of them has reference to the uncertainty of medical terminology, another has reference to the uncertainty in regard to the etiological significance of factors in the life and surroundings of an individual who later becomes the subject of disease. The latter difficulty has particular reference to the fact that the sort of disease which this paper attempts to treat is largely personal in its nature, development, and final outcome; and that the reaction of any individual to causes which work upon a large body of people cannot be accepted as carrying with it any large aspect of the total truth.

With the limitation implied in the foregoing, the reader will attempt to present to you as simply as possible certain deductions in respect to the prevalence of neurasthenia among the garment workers of this city. No attempt at present will be made to use detailed statistical proof, nor will the analysis of the whole material be given, but general conclusions derived from a study of 7000 workers in garment trades studied in the last ten years at the Jewish Dispensary in this city will be placed before you for consideration. This dispensary has an annual attendance of about 25,000 sick, of which from 5 to 10 per cent come in one way or another to the nervous department. Of these about 40 per cent of the males are garment workers and about 3 to 4 per cent of the women. This percentage of women would be much larger but for the reason that all married women have been excluded from this study on account of the additional tendency towards the development of neurasthenia which married life, numerous children, added responsibility, bad surroundings, and other factors of this sort carry with it.

The nationality of this class is almost wholly Russian Jewish. About 92 per cent belong to the Russian or Polish Jews, with a scattering of the various countries of Southeastern Europe—Bulgarians, Lithuanians, Gallicians, etc. To sum up, then, this is a study of 7000 nervously sick individuals whose chief employ-

ment is in the garment trades, mostly as factory hands in the clothing, cloak, and skirt making industries. On account of the lack of statistical analysis for which further study is essential, this paper cannot be looked upon as a contribution to industrial disease, but merely as a preliminary survey of the field.

Neurasthenia is a term devised many years ago by Beard, an American physician, to describe a condition of the nervous system which appeared to him to be peculiar to Americans. Nerve weakness is what he implied by its use; its cause, according to him, lay in habits and surroundings which, owing to his insular views, were typical of the American civilization in which he lived. Overwork, alcoholism, worry, intense application, overeating, etc., were the important factors in causing this disease.

The term neurasthenia, like many others that have come to be a permanent part of our vocabulary, was too convenient to be dropped after it was found that other countries and other civilizations had the same kind of clinical entity without just the same kind of productive factors at work.

With the tremendous development of our knowledge and interest in the functional diseases of the nervous system, the clinical picture to which neurasthenia has been applied became much narrowed, and now it is a fairly well understood and rather sharply limited disease, at least among neurologists. Neurasthenia is first of all a functional disease; that is, it is not dependent upon anatomical changes of an abnormal sort in the nervous system. It is therefore not organic. It manifests itself by two groups of symptoms, one of which has reference to conditions of abnormal fatigue, the other to conditions of abnormal irritability. Clinically expressed, an individual to whose symptoms the term neurasthenia may be applied is one who becomes easily and quickly fatigued following, for what is to him, a minimal amount of exertion, and whose nervous system shows abnormally rapid and intense reactions out of proportion altogether to the exciting stimuli.

It will be seen from this that for such a diagnosis there are at least two groups of symptoms which must be considered, one having a purely physical expression, such as muscular fatigue, headache, indigestion, rapid heart, etc.; and the other a purely psychical expression in which depression, hopelessness, intense introspection, and exaggeration of symptoms form the background.

An interesting phase of the present inquiry might be illustrated by a comparative view of the frequency of neurasthenia in private practice in an out-door clinic under my charge at the Jewish Dispensary. In the private practice of neurologists, where the average physical surroundings are good and where various trades are represented and in which factory workers are very much in minority, the diagnosis of neurasthenia is justified in only about 5 per cent of cases. In the Grand Avenue Dispensary, in which the patients are largely laborers, foundry workers, workers in the metal trades and various out of door businesses, neurasthenia is comparatively rare. In the Jewish Dispensary, on the other hand, where, as it has been stated, from 40 to 60 per cent are factory hands in the garment trades, it is the most common neurological diagnosis made. The total percentage of this diagnosis can easily reach from 25 to 30 per cent. Now this discrepancy is sufficiently startling to warrant an inquiry directed toward the discovery of the factors which are found among garment workers particularly to explain so marked a prevalence of neurasthenia in that class.

In order to take a fair view of the matter and to properly guard the conclusions arrived at, we must consider in the first place something about the temperament and physical characteristics of the Russian Jew. He, as a type, is particularly liable to affections of the nervous system of the class to which neurasthenia belongs. Furthermore, it should be admitted that fundamentally he is not well adapted to factory work, is not a particularly good garment worker, outside of his industry, ambition, sobriety, etc.; and the reason probably is that the Russian Jew is primarily a trader and not a maker of things. The history of his activities in Russia or Poland throws a great deal of light on this subject, particularly in relation to his change in business activities upon arriving in this country; so we have at the very outset a condition of inability and in a sense an actual monopoly of a class that is essentially not adapted to the work which is finally to embrace so many of them.

In considering the whole question of the factory methods as seen in this class of cases, care should be taken to keep in mind the unfortunate tendency which has drawn into a trade a body of individuals poorly adapted to that trade. When we come to sum up the etiological significance of factory work, this part of the question must be carefully weighed.

In seeking for causes for the prevalence of neurasthenia among garment workers, there should be sharply differentiated causes which are inherent in factory methods as such, and causes which have to do with the tendencies in the factory hands, which have already been pointed out.

An inquiry into the etiological significance of the factors productive in so large a proportion of neurasthenics among garment workers should be regarded as strictly medical in character, and as such should be guarded by the usual limitations prevalent in reasoning of a clinical character. To the medical investigator the question of the right or wrong of factory methods has no place, nor should the many issues involved in the social or economic aspect of this large subject cloud the search for causes and their results.

As a general conclusion it must be admitted that a factory in which garments are made, even if the most ideal plans as far as arrangement, ventilation, cleanliness, etc., are carried out, is scarcely a place where ideal conditions of physical and mental health can either be preserved or developed.

How far this applies to other industries cannot be here stated, as investigations into this particular field have, as far as the writer is aware, not been made. There are no doubt other trades which are more destructive of the nervous health of workers than garment trades, and perhaps there is a larger incidence of neurasthenia among the workers in other industries. The conclusions arrived at are therefore limited in scope to the investigations in hand, and must not be regarded as applicable to any other kind of trade.

It has appeared to me that there are certain phases of factory methods found in the garment trades—but let it be understood, not characteristic of it—which deserve emphasis as bearing upon the question, and which have a very positive and direct influence on the production of neurasthenia.

Work in factories which produce garments is not continuous but is planned to meet exigencies of fashion and season. This means that at stated periods of the year work must necessarily be rushed to completion. During such periods the worker is compelled to work overtime and at the highest possible productive capacity. Such a period of intense exertion is followed by a great slackening of work, during which the factory force is cut down sometimes to a minimum proportion. The economic effect

of being out of work or working at what, from the individual worker's point of view, is an economic loss, invalidates whatever value there might come from the cessation or lessening of labor. This brings up naturally the insecure tenure of labor among this class of workers. The anxiety incident to loss of the accustomed wage, the doubt as to the permanence of position, the irregularity of work, all tend to increase the load which the worker must carry. To the imaginative and highly introspective Russian Jewish temperament, all these things, and more which it is needless to mention, cause that state of mind or perhaps fosters that mental attitude which we rather vaguely call worry.

Now worry may be defined as non-productive thinking or pondering not governed by the usual laws of reasoning. It rapidly becomes a kind of temperamental background or atmosphere into which the individual's mental life works itself out. Worry has always been regarded as one of the most important causes in producing neurasthenia; work itself probably can never produce more than a temporary state of exhaustion, recovery from which is pretty certain. The period of relaxation and rest in the individual who adds worry to his work is prevented almost totally. The injury results largely because the mental activity incident to worry is ineffectual and unproductive. If it be granted that worry is a common condition among this class of workers, and my own experience would seem to admit this, then we have one factor which can be brought into direct relation to the prevalence of neurasthenia in so high a proportion of garment workers.

There is one other significant phase of factory methods largely used in garment trades that merits attention; this is the piecework system. I am conscious that in touching upon this I am treading upon delicate and debatable ground. My excuse is simply that I am talking and thinking as a physician who has no expert knowledge on this subject, but is mindful only of this one fact, that medically the piecework system is perhaps the most pernicious thing that could be devised to weaken what for a better term might be described as the dynamic efficiency of the nervous system. I am referring of course to the unregulated piecework system in which there is no maximum or average amount of work set down to keep the worker from speeding beyond his capacity. The pay that the pieceworker obtains for his labor is ingeniously devised and subject to change in amount so that he

must work at top speed to make it worth while. With the increased efficiency of the pieceworker, the price per piece of work turned out is commonly decreased, so that a greater and increasingly more intense effort is necessary to reach the individual's maximum reward for his labor. It needs no argument to convince even a sturdy advocate of that new idol called efficiency that such methods are bound, in the long run, to use up the worker. Charles William Eliot, in his recent essay on "Trade Unions and Capitalism", refers to piecework in this way: "Unless the stimulation to the individual is so intense, and the piece or contract work so limited and monotonous as to become unwholesome." From so earnest an advocate of the gospel of work and the virtue of competition, this is certainly significant. I have in my clinical experience sufficient evidence, I think, to suggest that the piecework system is in some instances a very direct cause in the production of a neurasthenic condition in a worker.

From the study of this rather large number of individuals engaged in similar kinds of work, it seems to me impossible to avoid the conclusion that the incidence of neurasthenia is altogether too high to be accounted for by racial or social peculiarities.

Some of the conditions found in garment trades which medically are recognized as important causative agents in the production of neurasthenia, I have endeavored to point out. Their absolute or comparative importance can only be arrived at by studies of a similar kind in other trades in which the material to be studied is of the same general kind in regard to racial and temperamental peculiarities.

It might be suggested that a collective investigation of such a kind on a large scale, embracing many kinds of trades followed through by different investigators, at various different centers, might throw additional light on the stubborn fact that some 25 to 30 per cent of 7000 garment workers who applied for relief at the Jewish Dispensary in the nervous department were found to be subjects of neurasthenia.